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A Progress Report

Race and Suffrage Today

"IN ANY future history of suffrage in the South, the decade of the 1940's will probably be known as the time of an awakening among Negroes and of a change of attitude by many whites toward Negro participation in this phase of government." So began *Race and Suffrage Since 1940,* a study prepared for the Southern Regional Council in 1948 by the late Dr. Luther P. Jackson.

The claim seems an understatement from the vantage point of 1953. Faced today with the tedious and long-range task of achieving full enfranchisement in every part of the region, we can see even more clearly how far and how fast Negro suffrage advanced in the Forties. In 1940, Southern Negroes who had got past the barriers of poll taxes, qualifications tests, and unfriendly election officials numbered about 250,000 — and most of these had been able to vote only in meaningless general elections. Then, as now, the all-important decisions in the one-party South were made in the Democratic primaries. For practical purposes, the Negro was completely disfranchised.

There was nothing new about this dismal state of affairs; it had existed for a generation. But the complacency with which Negroes had once accepted it was rapidly giving way in 1940 to a new determination. The onset of World War II with its emphasis on democratic values lent added force to the demand for full citizenship, and also did much to prepare the white South for the impending change.

The great achievement which followed was a triumph, in law, for a free ballot unhampered by racial restrictions. As a result, Negro registration in the Southern states climbed to more than a million, bringing in its wake substantial gains in public facilities and an improved political climate in many urban areas.

But those who rejoiced in the early victories have been sobered by the vexing problems which have persisted. There are still broad stretches of the South where Negroes can vote only with great difficulty, or not at all. And, even where the right to vote is secure, ignorance and apathy — those age-old enemies of popular government — seriously impede the Negro's civic progress.

THE "WHITE PRIMARY"

More than fifty years ago, Southern states sought to guarantee the exclusion of Negroes from effective political participation by decreeing that Democratic primaries — the only meaningful elections — should be limited strictly to white voters. The rationalization behind this move was simple — the primary was a purely private affair, and the political party holding it had absolute power to say who might and who might not participate.

Several earlier court decisions weakened this discriminatory arrangement, but it was the *Smith* v. *Allwright* decision of 1944 that finally toppled it. In an 8-to-1 decision, the U. S. Supreme Court declared: "The United States is a constitutional democracy. Its organic law grants to all citizens a right to participate in the choice of elected officials without restriction by any state because of race. This grant to the people of opportunity for choice is not to be nullified by a state through casting its electoral process in a form which permits a private organization to practice racial discrimination in the election."

This decision sounded the deathknell of the "white primary," but the end did not come immediately. Diehard leadership in the lower South was not yet convinced that Negroes had to be admitted to the state Democratic parties. South Carolina put the courts to the test with its "private club" plan, which consisted in the repeal of all state laws governing primaries, in order to buttress the argument that the "white primary" was a private function immune to legal action. This subterfuge was struck down by Federal Judge J. Waties Waring in 1947, as was a later requirement that all would-be voters subscribe to an oath of allegiance to "states' rights" and segregation.

Other Southern states which had kept a speculative eye on the South Carolina schemes were forced to abandon all hope of retaining the "white primary." Instead, they turned their attention to Alabama, where a different approach to Negro disfranchisement was showing considerable promise.

REGISTRATION

Unlike the South Carolina plan, which sought to bar Negro voters at the ballot box, the Alabama strategy was to eliminate them at the registration place. The notorious Boswell Amendment, passed in 1946, provided that an applicant must be able not only to "read and write" but also to "understand and explain" any article of the United States Constitution "to the reasonable satisfaction of the board of registrars." The significance of this measure lay in the arbitrary power which it granted local registrars to accept or reject whatever applicants they wished. It meant that they could — and usually did — find that no Negro, however well-informed, could explain the Constitution to their "satisfaction," while all white voters, however uneducated, "satisfied" them perfectly.

So effectively did the Boswell Amendment work that other states, like Georgia, began readying similar measures. But the prospect of a foolproof system of disfranchisement was dashed in 1949 by a federal court decision outlawing the Boswell Amendment as "an attempt to obviate the consequences" of the *Smith* v. *Allwright* decision. Alabama has since adopted a watered-down version of the Boswell Amendment, not yet tested in

the courts, but its lack of popular support is evident in the fact that it was passed by a scant majority of a few hundred votes.

Unfortunately, however, discriminatory registration practices can exist without the sanction of law. Local registrars are frequently a law unto themselves, particularly in rural areas, since they are subject to no close supervision or direction. They are likely to be heavily influenced in their decisions by the attitudes toward Negro voting which prevail in their communities. Both before and after the Boswell ruling, these officials have served as the custodians of disfranchisement in many a rural county.

The following discriminatory tactics, cited by Dr. Jackson, are still to be found in parts of the South:

(1) Requiring Negro applicants to produce one or more white character witnesses.

(2) Applying severe property qualifications and requiring only Negro applicants to show property-tax receipts.

(3) Strictly enforcing literacy tests against Negro applicants.

(4) Putting unreasonable questions on the Constitution to Negro applicants.

(5) Basing rejection of Negro applicants on alleged technical mistakes in filling out registration blanks.

(6) Requiring Negro applicants to fill out their own blanks, while those of whites are filled out for them by the officials.

(7) Requiring Negro applicants to suffer long waiting periods before the officials attend them.

(8) Evasion — informing Negro applicants that registration cards have run out, that all members of the registration board are not present, that it is closing time, or that the applicant "will be notified in due course."

(9) Deliberate insults or threats by officials or hangers-on.

THE POLL TAX

For many years, the poll tax was popularly regarded as the supreme method of restricting Negro suffrage. This notoriety was not wholly deserved for, though the poll tax does have racial significance, its discriminatory value has never approached that of the "white primary" and biased registration practices. It should be remembered that the poll tax was maintained in the Southern states throughout the years when there was little prospect of mass Negro voting. Its effect then was to restrict the existing electorate by imposing a heavy burden on low-income whites who might wish to vote.

By the time the Negro won the right to vote in the primary, rising incomes and the declining value of the dollar had made the poll tax less of an economic hardship. True, in Alabama where the tax is cumulative, a middle-aged new voter of either race might be faced with a bill for $36.00 — a formidable barrier indeed for many. But more important in terms of discrimination are the red-tape the poll tax imposes and the opportunities it gives biased officials to discourage or disqualify Negroes.

Today, only six Southern states cling to the poll tax in one form or another, and of these, Tennessee has limited the requirement almost to the vanishing point. In the other poll-tax states — Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia — there is strong public sentiment favoring repeal, but so far it has not found effective expression. Attempts to secure federal anti-poll tax legislation have

ESTIMATED NEGRO REGISTRATION IN 12 SOUTHERN STATES, 1947-1952

State	Negroes Registered in 1947	Negroes Registered in 1952
Alabama	6,000	50,000
Arkansas	47,000	65,000
Florida	49,000	125,000
Georgia	125,000	145,000
Louisiana	10,000	100,000
Mississippi	5,000	20,000
North Carolina	75,000	100,000
Oklahoma	50,000	60,000
South Carolina	50,000	115,000
Tennessee	80,000	85,000
Texas	100,000	175,000
Virginia	48,000	70,000
TOTALS	645,000	1,110,000

been equally unsuccessful, though there have been indications that Southern Congressmen would agree to submit the question to the voters as a Constitutional amendment. This would seem a peculiarly cumbersome way of ridding the South of an old evil that has little popular support.

CONTINUING PROBLEMS

If the 1940's are to be remembered as the decade of legal enfranchisement, it is to be hoped that the 1950's may be a decade of citizenship fully realized. There are still a few lingering examples of voting discrimination practiced under cover of law, but the main problems today must be solved in the community rather than the courts. It is well-nigh impossible to find legal remedies for petty evasions, delays, and "errors" of courthouse officials; for disapproving frowns and veiled threats; for routine, but highly selective, purges of registration lists.

This "cold war" of the ballot is now found chiefly in the old plantation areas or "black belt" of the South where Negroes make up a large part of the population. There, a quasi-feudal economy still hangs on. Most Negroes are tenant farmers or hired laborers whose landlords and employers do not look kindly on their voting. Moreover, the Negro who undertakes to qualify and cast his ballot usually must brave the organized resistance of the whole community. He can seldom rely on law enforcement officers and other public officials to support him in his effort to assert his rights.

Shifts in population and agriculture and farm ownership are moving the South steadily away from these outmoded conditions toward a more modern society. As more and more Negroes emerge from dependency to self-sufficiency, from farm tenancy to economic independence, from poverty to basic well-being, obstacles to the ballot prove less formidable. Meanwhile, however, discrimination in rural areas continues to be the most serious voting problem in the region.

By contrast, widespread opposition to Negro registration and voting has all but disappeared in the larger

Southern cities. Even six years ago, Dr. Jackson found that, in such metropolitan centers as Atlanta, Memphis, Jacksonville, and New Orleans, Negroes "may qualify with as much ease as they may in any Northern city." Further evidence is afforded by the election of Negro candidates to local offices in nine Southern cities within recent years.

But this admirable state of affairs has not meant in every case the normal integration of Negroes into public life that might have been expected. Again, Dr. Jackson sized up the problem, then just emerging:

'VOTING CONSCIOUSNESS'

In parts of the South, he wrote, "the act of a candidate seeking the support of qualified Negro voters is a common occurrence. Like white citizens, Negroes receive letters from candidates, are visited at their homes, and are addressed in public assemblies. Under these circumstances, a bargaining situation is created whereby Negroes might gain benefits for themselves if they only realized it. Schools, parks, playgrounds, and other facilities might well be the result of this new awareness of the Negro ballot. But office seekers are frequently disappointed to find so few colored persons qualified to participate in a forthcoming election. . . . . It is not always the barriers to voting which disqualify the colored people, but sometimes the absence of a voting consciousness among them."

This problem has, if anything, grown more pronounced in the past few years. Far from becoming a mass threat to white political control, as the demagogues warned, Southern Negroes have not voted in sufficient numbers to assure themselves of impartial treatment. Hence, it is still possible for unscrupulous politicians to use race prejudice as a campaign weapon, even in some areas where Negroes can vote without hindrance. In such cases, the candidate who has decent attitudes on race, and would welcome the support of Negro voters, faces a difficult situation. He is caught between the race-baiting of his opponent and the lack of substantial Negro support at the polls. All this has the unwelcome effect of causing office seekers to conceal or repudiate their enlightened racial views.

Oddly enough, the proportionately small size of the Negro electorate has lent plausibility to the "bloc vote" charge so dear to the hearts of the race-baiters. As every informed person knows, members of any group will vote as a bloc whenever they are singled out for special attack. Negroes are no exception. When they vote solidly against a candidate it is because he has abused their race and opposed their legitimate aspirations. When race is not an issue in a campaign, their votes are distributed about the same as those of white voters.

But the politician who hopes to benefit from race prejudice finds it useful to cry out against "bloc voting." He knows that by doing so he will incur the opposition of almost every Negro voter, but he counts on gaining more votes than he will lose. Too often, that is the outcome. Negroes do vote solidly against the prejudiced candidate, but in too small numbers to insure his defeat. Ironically, he then points to the election returns as proof of his "bloc vote" allegations.

Where does the Negro vote stand today? It is all but impossible to get

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From the *Asheville Citizen*

'THE SOUTH LIFTS ITS HEAD'

Tuskegee Institute has no lynchings, as such, to report for 1952, *according to criteria used in our Department of Records and Research. This is the first time such a report has been made in the* 70 *years of lynching record keeping,* 1882-1952. — Press release, Dec. 31, 1952.

The nation, and thus the South, turned a corner in 1952. As the report of the much-respected Tuskegee Institute, quoted above, so plainly indicates, a form of crime once prevalent in the United States and often peculiar to the South has been "wiped out." In all soberness and conscience it might be said that nothing more astonishing — and heartening — has happened in human relationships in America within the lifetime of most of us now living.

We use the term "wiped out" advisedly. Of course, there may be more lynchings. Yet . . . if it would be reasonable to say that not a single case of cancer or heart disease or tuberculosis occurred within a year, and that hence cancer or heart disease or tuberculosis had been "wiped out," it would be reasonable to say that the ugly crime of lynching has been expunged from the record in America. . . .

To place Tuskegee's report in its proper perspective it is necessary to go back a few years. As recently as 1933 there were 28 lynchings spread over 11 states. By 1946 the incidence of the crime had been reduced to six cases. . . . There was one case in 1947, two in 1948, three in 1949, two in 1950 and again only one last year. Contrary to the fears of sociologists and others who study human behavior patterns, the postwar period did not bring the expected tensions which are manifest in crimes of racial passion.

It may well be argued that the mob with the rope and the torch has been replaced by more subtle forms of group violence against persons. Tuskegee properly calls attention to bombings and attempted bombings directed for the most part against minority groups in the last four years. Sixty-eight instances are cited in 13 states, including five states outside the South. . . .

These crimes are no less sordid or reprehensible in their way. Yet if it is possible to draw a distinction, it is the distinction between the howling, lustful mob and the covert attack by one or more individuals seeking not merely to usurp the function of the law but to vent a warped kind of vengeance on a racial or religious group. This kind of violence has taken place in North Carolina and it has taken place in Ohio. . . .

For the moment, however, we are concerned with overt mob violence. In its old aspect, it is a thing of the past. . . . Education, respect for the law, and most of all an awareness of the rights of the human person under the law — these things have prevailed. The record of a year is a record to be viewed at length with pride just as in the unhappy past it was viewed at length with sorrow and humiliation. The South can lift up its head.

U. S. Secretary of State Tells How Discrimination Hurts World Relations

What effect do racial discrimination and segregation in this country have on our foreign relations? Not long ago, the U. S. Attorney General put this question to the Secretary of State. The Secretary's reply, which was quoted in the Government's brief on the school segregation cases, is here presented.

* * * I wrote the Chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Committee on May 8, 1946, that the existence of discrimination against minority groups was having an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. At that time I pointed out that discrimination against such groups in the United States created suspicion and resentment in other countries, and that we would have better international relations were these reasons for suspicion and resentment to be removed.

During the past six years, the damage to our foreign relations attributable to this source has become progressively greater. The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practices of discrimination against minority groups in this country. As might be expected, Soviet spokesmen regularly exploit this situation in propaganda against the United States, both within the United Nations and through radio broadcasts and the press, which reaches all corners of the world. Some of these attacks against us are based on falsehood or distortion; but the undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare.

The hostile reaction among normally friendly peoples, many of whom are particularly sensitive in regard to the status of non-European races, is growing in alarming proportions. In such countries the view is expressed more and more vocally that the United States is hypocritical in claiming to be the champion of democracy while permitting practices of racial discrimination here in this country.

The segregation of school children on a racial basis is one of the practices in the United States that has been singled out for hostile foreign comment in the United Nations and elsewhere. Other peoples cannot understand how such a practice can exist in a country which professes to be a staunch supporter of freedom, justice, and democracy. The sincerity of the United States in this respect will be judged by its deeds as well as by its words.

Although progress is being made, the continuance of racial discrimination in the United States remains a source of constant embarrassment to this Government in the day-to-day conduct of its foreign relations; and it jeopardizes the effective maintenance of our moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world.

Race and Suffrage

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exact figures for each state, since registration and election results are seldom recorded by race. The accompanying table, however, gives the Southern Regional Council's best estimates of Negro registration in 1952, as compared with Dr. Jackson's figures for 1947.

Although the five-year increase is substantial for some states, the overall gain is disappointing. It is particularly so when we consider that the 1947 registration was, in most cases, the fruits of a few months' intensive effort following the enfranchising court decisions. The Georgia drive, for example, was spectacularly successful, coming as it did in the period of initial resistance to Negro balloting. The slight advance made since that time, under much more favorable conditions, appears puny by contrast.

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

To generalize for the whole region, registration among Negro citizens of voting age is only about half as widespread as among white citizens. Virginia furnishes a good example. Of the white citizens of voting age in that state in 1949, 39 per cent were registered; of Negro citizens of voting age, 16 per cent. It must be remembered, too, that registration is not an accurate measure of ballots actually cast. In many recent elections, the proportion of registered Negro voters who have turned out at the polls has been substantially below that of white voters, thus further widening the gap.

Negro organizations and community leaders are not unaware of these problems; in some states they are waging or planning registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns. But there is a pressing need for more such effort, carried on unremittingly in every part of the South.

Twenty years ago, the great roadblocks to Southern democracy were poverty and official denial of constitutional rights. Economic growth and sweeping court decisions have put us well on the way to surmounting both. The challenge now is to build a common citizenship which will make our state and local governments truly responsive to the wishes and needs of all the people. That can be achieved only by informed community action and the fullest and wisest use of the ballot.

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